

## Opinion Editorial for Labor Day, September 4, 2006

Submitted by:



### Help Wanted: Women

Company offers challenging work with slim chance of promotion for person with excellent qualifications. Salary 29% - 41% below the going rate. Join the company and we will maintain that differential regardless of your experience and contributions. You will earn at least a quarter of a million dollars less than many co-workers doing the same work over your lifetime—and if you take time off for family care-giving, you could lose as much as \$700,000 in your lifetime. Retirement benefits reduced commensurately. Apply today!

This Labor Day, it might do us well to thank the huge numbers of Nebraska women who participate in the workforce. Nebraska women are making more than their share of difference in our state's economy and quality of life, yet little is known or considered about working women, and the tremendous impact they have on the economic and social stability of the state of Nebraska.

Nebraska women over age 16 who work full-time, year-round, participate in the workforce at a rate of 67%, ranking Nebraska women *number three in the country as workforce participants*. (South Dakota is number two, and Minnesota is number one for women's participation in the labor force).

Yet, women in Nebraska are still only earning 71 cents for every dollar a man in Nebraska earns, which is below the national average of 77 cents.

Nebraska is 44<sup>th</sup> in the nation for wage equality --all of Nebraska's neighbors: Colorado, Iowa, Kansas and South Dakota do a better job with wage equality.

These facts are revealed by the Institute of Women's Policy Research (IWPR) Status of Women in the States, which is released each year, and the national WomenWork organization, of which the Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women is an affiliate member.

Is there really still a wage differential between men and women? What could account for it?

Your federal tax dollars support the non-partisan Government Accountability Office. This office studied the issue and presented its findings to Congress. The report entitled "Women's Earnings: Work Patterns Partially Explained the Difference Between Men's and Women's Earnings" and can be found at the Government Accountability Office Website at : <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d0435.pdf>.

This study controlled for factors that influence earnings, such as time out of the workforce, education, work experience, hours worked per year, etc. The end result is that, even after controlling for these factors, the GAO found that there is still an unexplainable 21% wage gap between men and women performing comparable work. In Nebraska the wage gap is even higher than this national average, and the gap here between men and women is at 29%.

This leads the Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women to conclude that discrimination against Nebraska women in their workplaces still exists. Providing further substantiation are additional statistics from IWPR that reveal Nebraska women in managerial and professional occupations are so scarce, that the state ranks at the bottom of the national pile, or # 49 out of 50 states for women in upper managerial and professional echelons.

As a result of these findings, the Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women has assembled the Nebraska Women's Legal Rights Handbook to help women navigate the terrain of working issues, as well as other major women's legal concerns. The handbook contains information about Nebraska's laws regarding equal pay, discrimination, retaliation, unemployment, leave time, workers compensation and benefits. In addition to citizen requests for the handbook, the commission plans to make this handbook available to every public library and school in the state.

The Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women determined in planning and strategy sessions conducted earlier, that Nebraska women and work issues are so paramount, the commission is concentrating efforts on addressing these challenges. Through advocacy, referral, research, education and outreach and a special survey, the commission will compile data, investigate and researches program opportunities and propose and help to shape policy solutions that address these findings. Then, the governor-appointed commissioners will participate in the legislative process that can help senators implement legislative bills with 48% of the Nebraska work force (women) in mind.

Additionally, the Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women is exploring and implementing partnerships that will allow women to gain training for better jobs; help women to consider non-traditional careers with higher rates of pay; and address the economic and geographical concerns that affect Nebraska women in rural areas with limited access to these programs and services. One of the major partners helping in these efforts is the new Nebraska affiliate of Women Work: a national organization dedicated to meeting the challenges of women in the workforce.

How does the difference in pay between men and women affect Nebraskans?

In Lincoln a single parent with one preschooler must make \$12.05 an hour to be self-sufficient (meaning they are able to meet basic needs in the regular market place without public or private subsidies). If you are a single parent with two children you need to earn \$16.27 an hour to reach self-sufficiency. Omaha is even more expensive. A single parent must make \$13.33 an hour to support themselves and one preschooler. A single parent in Omaha with two children must make \$17.69 an hour to be self-sufficient.

What if you don't live in a major metropolitan Nebraska city? Chances are you have to juggle TWO low-paying jobs to support your family. If you are single, what do you do with your children when you are working two jobs? Could the lack of policy and programs pro-actively available to help working women make it on their own, be contributing to the glut of ill consequences to be suffered by Nebraska's children and foster children at a large taxpayer subsidy?

But, what can individuals do to encourage equal pay for equal work?

The most important action anyone can take is contacting your state and federal representatives to let them know that this is an important issue. They represent YOU and need to know what issues are affecting your life as a constituent. You may also organize a livable wage campaign, in support of wages that allow people to live without having to apply for state assistance.

Have you updated your business policies that are more in tune with these revolutionary changes in the workforce, which encompasses more women than it did in the 1960's? Are positions in your firm still largely characterized by gender, and not ability? How many men in your clerical force? How many women in your managerial positions? Think about this, and do something about it if you see an old pattern.

You can organize company efforts to provide on-site daycare; you can ask businesses to consider flex-time and other leave policies so you can tend to your family's care giving emergencies. You can also consider conducting your business with those that employ fair earnings practices.

Women's wages are family issues. When women are not given equal pay for equal work, it brings the whole family down. Women contribute at least 36% to family earnings. Single women in Nebraska bring it in all by themselves and it isn't enough. What would happen if that 36% suddenly disappeared from the family budget? Or when a working single mom can't support her own children? Do the math. Look at your tax bill.

Nebraska working women are past due for recognition of their economic contributions, and should not be penalized for care-giving duties that interrupt their careers. A large majority of Nebraska women are stuck in low-paying jobs—66% of all minimum wage earners in Nebraska are women, and the legislative bill to raise the minimum wage in Nebraska failed last year! We need to regard women with a lot more respect and commensurate pay for the quality and quantity of work they perform in Nebraska. Be assured that Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women is already working on it !

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Sources:

Research Office, Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women  
Institute of Women's Policy Research (IWPR) Status of Women in the States, which is released each year,  
WomenWork, [www.womenwork.org](http://www.womenwork.org);